

Contemplating the Trinity

“A potpourri of biblical verses, liturgical praise, dogmatic formulas, exegesis, and theological aphorisms, . . . [that] leads its user step by step through meditations on paradise, the Song of Songs, and the Virgin Mary to mystical union and, finally, contemplation of the Trinity.”

That’s how Barbara Newman describes the Rothschild Canticles in her essay, “Contemplating the Trinity: Text, Image, and the Origins of the Rothschild Canticles.” The Rothschild Canticles is the name of a lavishly illuminated manuscript of French-Flemish origin, produced at the turn of the 14th century. The book is not impressive in size, being just four and a half inches by about three and a quarter. It is thought to have been made at the Benedictine abbey of Bergues-Saint-Winnoc in Flanders, what is today the northern tip of France.



Arguably, the most extraordinary section of the book is a “florilegium” (collection of literary extracts) on the Trinity, which draws especially on St. Augustine’s treatise, *“On the Trinity.”* Within these pages are nineteen full-page miniatures that offer some of the most stunning iconographic creativity in representing the Christian understanding of the Trinity.

Visually depicting the Holy Trinity poses one of the most difficult problems in Christian art. How is an artist to portray three distinct, divine persons

who share one essence—three Persons, one God? Historical attempts have included:

- Three identical [Christ-like men](#) (this one is relatively rare)
- Three mystically [conjoined faces](#), or three separate heads sharing one body (nicknamed the “monstrous Trinity” and condemned by the Roman Catholic Church)
- The [Gnadenstuhl](#) (Throne of Mercy, or Throne of Grace), in which the Father is shown holding a crucifix or, in a later variation known as the [Mystic Pietà](#), his slumped Son, while the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove hovers between them
- [Triangles](#), [trefoils](#), [triquetras](#), or other abstract geometric designs that suggest Three-in-Oneness
- In the Eastern Orthodox Church, the Holy Trinity is represented by [three angels seated at a table](#). These are the three mysterious visitors of Abraham in Genesis 18, believed to be a theophany (visible manifestation of God).

The illustrator of the Rothschild Canticles relies on none of these conventions, instead inventing an almost wholly original visual language to express the rich, yet challenging doctrine of the Incarnation. In contrast to other depictions of the Trinity, Newman says we find in the Rothschild Canticles,

a playful, intimate approach to the triune God, marked by spontaneity rather than solemnity, dynamism rather than hieratic stasis, wit rather than awe. There is no hint of narrative, but something more like an eternal dance. . . . The divine persons are caught up in an everlasting game of hide-and-seek with humans while they enact among themselves, in ever-changing ways, that mutual coinherence that the Greek fathers called *perichoresis*—literally “dancing around one another.” (135)

Jongleurs (travelling medieval entertainers who performed juggling, acrobatics, music, and recitation), angels, and various figures stand in for viewers and manifest a joyous attitude. For example,

on fol. 79r a celestial percussionist attacks a row of bells with mallets; on fol. 84r, angels in the upper left and right play a game of ring toss; on fol. 88r, musicians . . . strum whimsically shaped zithers embellished with animal heads. . . . In the lower right corner of fol. 96r, an elfin figure bends over backward to play an instrument whose pinwheel shape mimics the great solar wheel behind which divine Wisdom hides. Four characters in the corners of fol. 98r stretch their arms as if to join hands in a cosmic dance, while on fol. 100r, three spectators raise their

hands in wonder beneath a divine apparition, imitating the stunned postures of Peter, James, and John at the Transfiguration. . . . Collectively, they seem to proclaim that the reader need not be ashamed or afraid, even though all human attempts to comprehend the Trinity are comically inept. Nonetheless, she can merrily follow the Lord of the Dance. (135–36)

Newman continues:

In the Rothschild Canticles, coinherence is the dimension of Trinitarian theology to which the artist seems most profoundly committed. The complex relationality of the three persons is conveyed through the delicate interplay of touch, gesture, and changing positions. Sometimes the Father and Son join hands; on fol. 104r they touch feet behind the wheel they hold. Sometimes they grasp the sides, wings, or talons of the dove, and sometimes they unite around a fourth figure representing the Divine Essence. (143–44)

Moreover,

the artist invented some simple devices to keep the paradox of triunity before the mind's eye at all times. For example, a prime signifier of divinity—the golden sun with its waving, tentacle-like rays—is sometimes single (fols. 44r, 81r, 88r, 90r), sometimes triple (fols. 40r, 83r, 94r). Elsewhere the artist complicated this formula. On fol. 79r, three small suns for each person are superimposed on one large sun; fols. 92r and 100r insert a smaller sun inside a bigger one; and on fol. 96r, two suns interlock to form a double wheel with spokes radiating both inward and outward. (141)

Another recurring and versatile motif in the Trinity cycle is the “veil,” a thematic device which signifies both God's presence and God's hiddenness. Sometimes it forms a hammock in which the Trinity rests (fols. 75r, 88r); or is braided in an enclosing circle, dangling down for humans to touch (fol. 81r); or is looped around the three Persons, nestling them snugly (fol. 84r); or is knotted and clutched (fol. 92r); or is draped over bands of cloud (fol. 106r). In this artistic program, veils both conceal and reveal, communicating the paradoxical nature of God who is concealed in mystery—incomprehensible—and yet accessible, wanting to be known.

Notably, the profusion of Trinitarian imagery is supplemented in the manuscript with textual reminders of the limitations of images. In *On the Trinity* 8.4.7, for example, Augustine says that all man-made images of God

are false, and yet, he says, they are nevertheless useful insofar as they help our minds to grasp the invisible reality to which they point.

Below is a compilation of Trinity miniatures from the Rothschild Canticles, reproduced in the order they appear in the manuscript and prefaced with one or more of the quotations that appear on its facing page (in order that you can see how intricately text and image relate).



“Dominus in orisunte eternitatis et supra tempus” (The Lord is on the horizon of eternity and beyond time)



"Tu es vere Deus absconditus" (Truly you are a hidden God, Isa. 45:15)





Fol. 75r

“Bene ergo ipsa difficultas loquendi cor nostrum ad intelligentiam trahit, et per infirmitatem nostram coelestis doctrina nos adjuvat: ut quia in Deitate Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus sancti nec singularitas est, nec diversitas cogitanda, vera unitas et vera Trinitas possit quidem simul mente aliquatenus sentiri, sed non possit simul ore proferri.”—Pope Leo I, *Sermo* 76.2

(“This difficulty in expressing clearly by speech draws our hearts to the power of discerning, and, through our weakness, the heavenly doctrine helps us, that, because of the divinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, neither singularity nor diversity is to be considered. The true unity and true Trinity can be apprehended ‘at the same time’ by the mind, but cannot be produced at the same time by the lips.”

Trans. Jane Patricia Freeland, CSJB, and Agnes Josephine Conway, SSJ)

“Pater complacet sibi in Filio et Filius in Patre, et Spiritus sanctus ab utroque”

(The Father is well pleased in the Son, and the Son in the Father, and the Holy Spirit is from both)



Fol. 77r

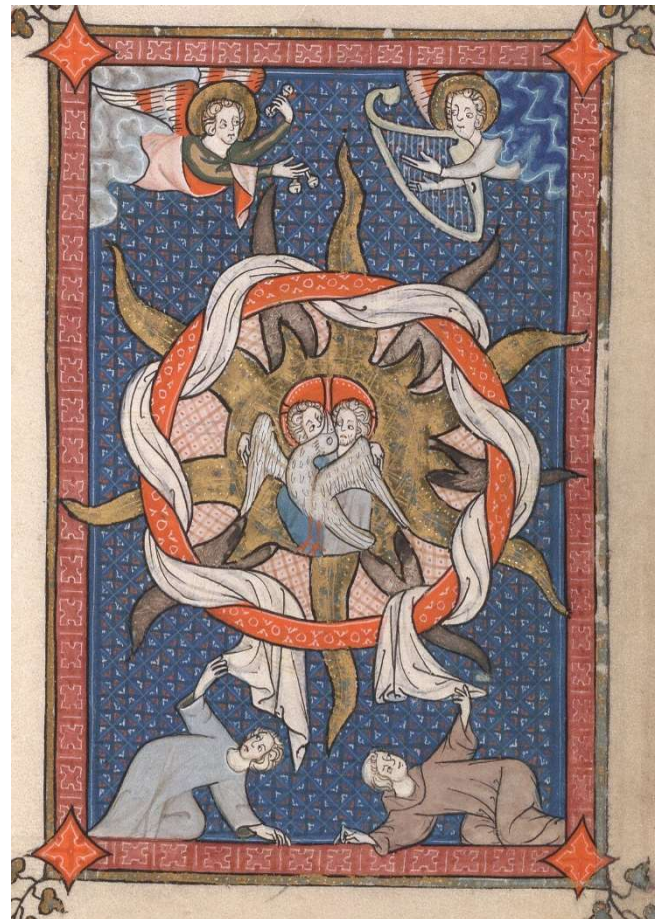


Note how the Spirit and Son are here represented by a human head and hand and by a dove, respectively. But the Father is wholly hidden behind the third star.

Fol. 79r

“Dicebat enim intra se si tetigero tantum vestimentum eius salva ero”
 (She said within herself, if I touch the hem of his garment, I will be healed. Matt. 9:21)

Here the Holy Spirit is illustrated as the person *“qui facit ex utroque unum”* (who makes both one; cf. Eph. 2:14), as cited on the facing page. Notice the shared halo.

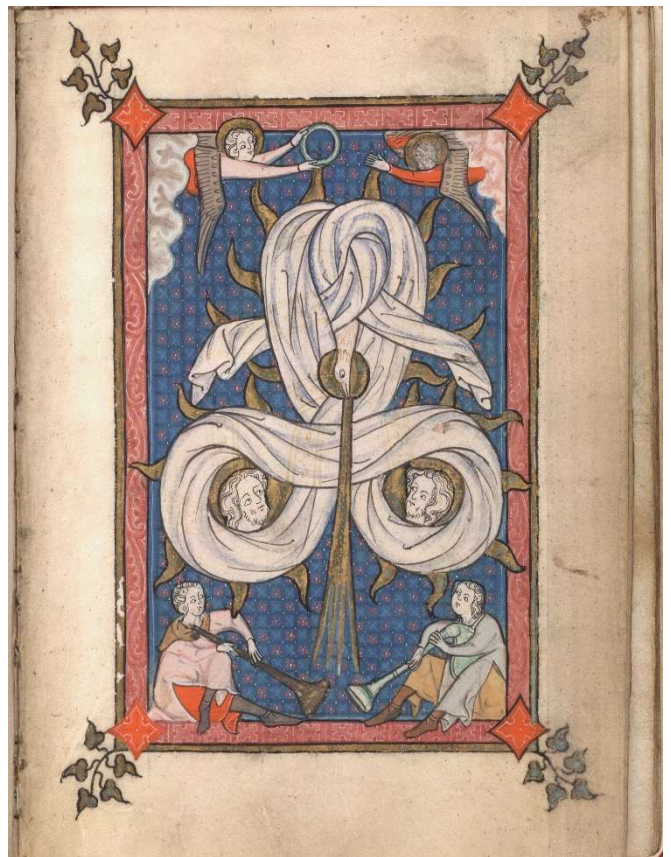


Fol 81r



Fol. 83r

“Trinus personaliter et unus essentialiter”
(Three in persons and one in essence)



Fol. 84r



Fol. 88r

“Dominus Deus noster Deus unus est”
 (The Lord our God is one God) (Mark 12:29)

“Ita et singula sung in singulis, et omnia in singulis, et singula in omnibus, et omnia in omnibus, et unum omnia. Qui videt hec vel ex parte, vel per speculum et in enigmate, gaudeat cognoscens Deum.” —

Augustine, *On the Trinity* 6.12

(“They are each in each and all in each, and each in all and all in all, and all are one. Whoever sees this even in part, or in a puzzling manner in a mirror [1 Cor. 13:12], should rejoice at knowing God.” Trans. M. Mellet, OP, and Th. Camelot)



Fol. 90r



“Sapientia sua, que pertendit a fine usque ad finem fortiter et disponit omnia suaviter”

(His wisdom, which reaches from end to end mightily and orders all things sweetly, Wisdom 8:1)

Fol.92r

“Tres vidit et unum adoravit” (He saw three and worshipped one), a liturgical verse referring to the Trinitarian epiphany in Genesis 18:1–3, in which Abraham saw three men, fell down in worship, and then addressed his divine visitors in the singular.

Note how the three persons of the Godhead wear the sun like a collar.



Fol. 94r



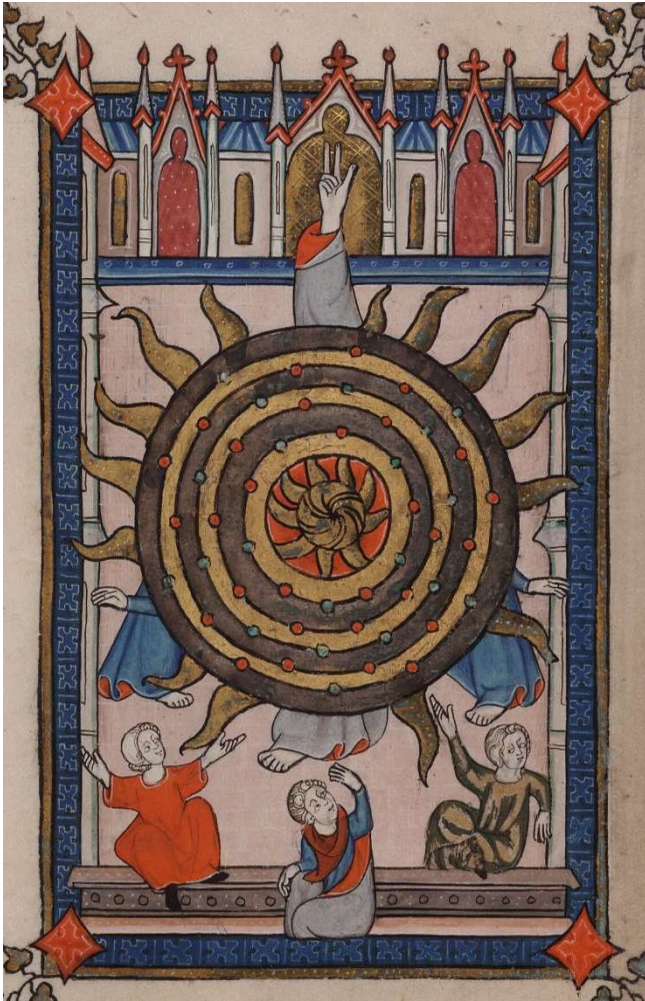
Fol. 96r

*“Gyrum caeli circuivi sola et in profundum
abyssi penetravi et in fluctibus maris
ambulavi”*

(I [Wisdom] have circled the vault of
heaven alone, Ecclesiastes 24:8)



Fol. 98r



Fol. 100r

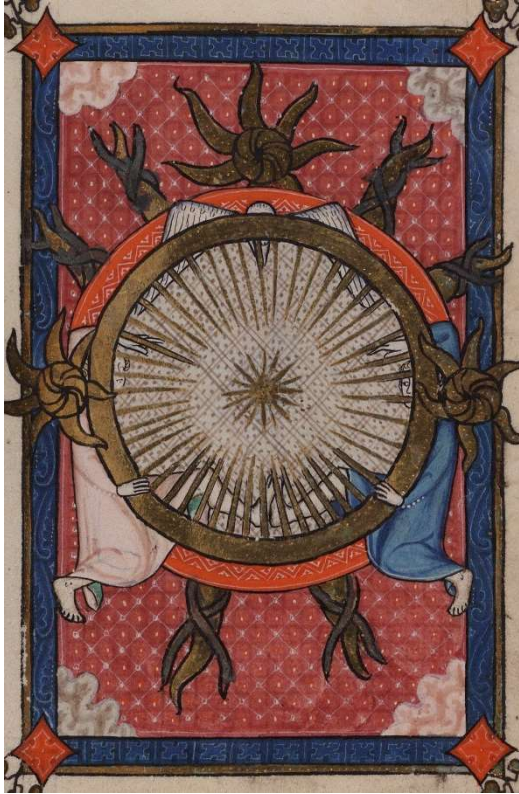
Optime et pulcrius loquitur qui de Deo tacet” (He speaks best and most beautifully who is silent about God)

“*Abscondes eos in abdito faciei tuae*” (You hide them [the saints] in the covert of your presence, Psalm 30:21)

Notice how the Trinity is represented here by three feet and three hands, each belonging to a different person, peeping out from behind a giant sun disc!



Fol. 102r



“Centrum meum ubique locorum, circumferentia autem nusquam” (My center is in all places, my circumference nowhere). Also, *“Quod Deus est, scimus. Quid sit, si scire velimus, / Contra nos imus. Qui cum sit summus et imus, / Ultimus et primus, satis est; plus scire nequimus.”*
 (We know *that* God is; if we wish to know *what* he is, / We go against ourselves. That he is the highest and the lowest, / The last and the first, is enough; we can know no more.) And another: *“Deus fuit semper et erit sine fine; ubi semper fuit, ibi nunc est. / Et ubi nunc est ibi fuit tunc.”* (God always was and shall be without end; where he always was, there he is now. And where he is now, there he was then.)

Fol. 104r

And lastly, the final text page in the Trinity cycle, which faces a nonfigural miniature of concentric rings of fire and cloud, contains this unidentified dialogue:

Domine, duc me in desertum tue deitatis et tenebrositatem tui luminis, et duc me ubi tu non es. Mea nox obscurum non habet, sed lux glorie mee omnia inlucessit. Bernardus oravit: Domine duc me ubi es. Dixit ei: Barnarde, non facio, quoniam si ducerem te ubi sum, annihilareris michi et tibi.

(Lord, lead me into the desert of your divinity and the darkness of your light; and lead me where you are not. My night has no darkness, but the light of my glory illumines all things. Bernard prayed, Lord, lead me where you are. He said to him, Bernard, I will not, for if I led you where I am, you would be annihilated both to me and to yourself.)



Fol. 106r

While human efforts to visualize the Trinity will always be clumsy and defective, the Rothschild Canticles artist has been more successful than most before or since. These miniatures convey, with whimsy and warmth, the eternal relationship of Love which is at the heart of the universe.

And so we see here ‘visual theology’ at its best—art which not only invites us to spend time studying, meditating on, and delighting in the profound theological content conveyed in a compact and sensory format.